A Collision of Ships

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On a Higher-Dimensional Ship in the Hollow

Abraytha Janus Colefia chortled with glee as he adjusted the fundamental parameters that fed into *Katioka's* furnace-heart. Even one-handed, however, he made sure to be exceedingly careful. It was no laughing matter to prepare any ship, let alone a *living* ship, for a journey into a world of pure whimsy where logic was a game at most, and more often forgotten altogether. And then, there were the coordinates to think of. Abraytha had waited too long for this to be disappointed at the last moment; if he was to make this journey into the Carrollian Canon, then he wanted the real thing, Cheshire Cat and all, not some cheap metafictive copy.

But he had faith. Faith in that strange, wonderful pen-pal whom he had yet to meet. Faith in Wonderland itself. Faith in the item he was still clutching in his other hand, as though afraid that it might turn into fairy dust if he took his eyes off it.

An invitation to the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.

A childhood dream come true.

So absorbed was Abraytha in humming a musical version of *Jabberwocky* that his experienced fingers erred, and flicked a singular switch which had really ought to remain un-flicked. Having failed to notice his error, the distracted pilot was just as oblivious to the slight divergence in the course of his ship. A few bars of music later, he stepped away from the controls, still walking on air, and proud of a job apparently well done.

Satisfied with his progress, Janus sauntered back into the elevator and began his ascent upwards. The primary rooms aboard *Katioka,* the ones which constituted his living space, were on the upper levels, safely away from the furnace — and that included the dining hall, which happened to be where he was now headed. Excitement really worked up an appetite!

* * *

On a Higher-Dimensional Ship in the Tourbillon

The crew of *this* higher-dimensional vessel — consisting of the Archons Mrellin, Nardeth, and Zerlan — was assembled in the third living room of

the Ship. All three, as a matter of fact, were relaxing in the embrace of its plush armchairs, Zerlan having insisted to Nardeth that their Ship was fully on-path through the Tourbillon, heading away from Eos 6 and towards new adventures untold, through the indescribable hyperplane of temporal and spatial crossing which the Ship's manual had insisted, several times, was to be referred to as 'the Tourbillon' — not 'the Turning', not 'the *Swelgendryne*', and certainly not anything beginning with a V.

"Tea?" Nardeth asked the group. Nardeth had remarkably big eyes and long, thick eyelashes; long eyelashes framed their sharp features.

"Mhm," answered Zerlan, not looking up.

Mrellin remained silent for a while, before registering the question and answering by means of a swift "No, thank — actually, yes please!"

Nardeth shook their head, smiling, and walked away, down one of the endless corridors and towards one of the Ship's various kitchens — wondering, not for the first time, how Zerlan had quite that many freckles.

Almost immediately after Nardeth had left, the entire room began to shake.

"Get to the pilot's room immediately!" Mrellin ordered Zerlan.

From her unusually commanding tone, it was clear to her crewmates that she was wholly terrified.

Zerlan rushed in, but before ze could even check any of the controls, let alone adjust them, the central rotor shattered, sending shards of Miastrotran glass all over the room. One would have pierced Zerlan's chest, had ze not managed to dodge out of the way in time.

Not being the type of Archon to waste precious instants dwelling on that brush with death, ze moved forward at once to inspect the damage, and found that the controls themselves had been utterly ruined, leaving no possibility of the trio navigating the Tourbillon. Zerlan was dismayed. Even the cloaking field controls had been destroyed — now the Ship's exterior was trapped looking like some old cabin.

Nardeth came back with the tea. Fire fell down from the roof, and they rushed to protect the drinks.

* * *

Abraytha felt the walls of *Katioka* sway too and fro. At first he thought it was just a stray fractal in reality rocking up against the edges of the shell, but the rocking did not end. Ornaments fell from high shelves, cluttering up the corridor, until suddenly it didn't; the Ship had come to a sudden stop.

It was obvious to Abraytha that *Katioka* had hit something.

It was equally obvious to him that, under the circumstances, this 'something' had every probability of being the hull of another ship.

He tried to look outside, to inspect the damage or at least see where they'd landed, but the nature of the exterior intercosmic substances made his head hurt. It was in moments like these that Abraytha really regretted having skipped out on the Reality Studies course in the University of Alarnakara. The planet Gieakron had had no finer institution of higher learning for the aspiring multiversal explorer, and he'd known that even then, on an intellectual level, but his youthful self-confidence had been quite unshakable. Well, had he been a more reckless kind of time-space traveller, Abraytha would have quite liked to drop in on his younger self and give him a good shake or two.

Inchoately upset with himself, he retreated from the porthole window. He wondered if the people on the other Higher-Dimensional Ship were coping any better with the unexpected accident. There was probably something to be done for traffic to resume on both ends of the collision, and he could only hope that they'd figure it out first; his own mind was still spinning with teacups and dormice and Alices.

* * *

Had he been able to see across the void and through the incongruous wooden cabin exterior, Abraytha's question would have answered itself, for the interior of the other Higher-Dimensional Ship was in fact on fire. The flames had been raging for a little while, now, and showed no sign of abating.

Mrellin walked through the inferno, determined anger in her eyes as she stalked toward the closed doors by which one might exit the ship. Walking out of a Ship mid-flight was probably a bad idea; the Ship itself seemed to think so, for when she swung those doors wide open, she was faced with a decrepit wooden surface. It needn't have bothered. No mere arrangement of rotting planks was a match for Mrellin's determination to track down the saboteur, pin them to the nearest available wall, and find out what the hell had happened here.

So she kicked down the overlapping beams of wood, sending splinters back into her Ship, but launching most of the debris into the *other* craft. From it came a strange howling sound, like the wind between the teeth of a giant.

Cautiously, but resolutely, Mrellin stepped forward into the alien Ship, and as she passed over the threshold she felt a most peculiar sensation — the walls of reality were crunching down on each other, the angle of their connection being established only by Camboolimatics. Luckily, Mrellin had studied Camboolimatics in her youth, and so she made it through without her biodata being ripped apart — mostly. Her hair was now a light pink, and upon chronogenetic analysis would appear to have always been.

* * *

Abraytha felt a strange tingle through his body — and matched it with a shiver all his own. He knew that peculiar feeling: it was a sure sign that *Katioka* had been damaged. It was her alien pain he was feeling, through their psychic bond.

He made his way up and down many corridors, essentially playing a game of 'hot-or-cold' with his abode, trying to find where the issue was.

The tingle started to feel much greater as he neared a particular area of the Abode, one which he had initially designed as an entrance-way, before —

He stopped in his tracks.

Someone was standing there. A humanoid with pink hair and glowering eyes, standing at the other end of the hallway.

She looked around, analysing each nook and cranny of the hallway, until her eyes settled on Abraytha himself. She seemed to look him over, as if weighing him up in expectation of a fight — although, had he not been in the throes of fairly warranted paranoia it might have occurred to him that she was simply mesmerised by the aberrant peculiarity of a winged, goat-horned figure whose eccentric fashion sense appeared second only to that of the President Kodachrome of the antebellum era.

The woman shoved her hand out toward Abraytha.

"Mrellin," she said.

It took him until she added "What's your name?" to realise that this had been her name, not some exotic greeting hitherto unknown to him.

Taken aback by the stranger's confidence, he stammered broken syllables for half a minute, hands fussing back and forth as he debated whether to accept the handshake, before he finally returned the introduction.

"I," he said with as much dignity as he could manage by then, "am Abraytha Janus Colefia, son of Yophese Iris Colefia, Castaway of Ishiok; and of Steorra Janus Upyr, Shambler from the Stars."

"I didn't understand half of those words, but you're coming back with me into my Ship and we can talk there, with the rest of my crew"

"I… uh… okay."

He surprised himself with the rapidity of his acquiescence, but something about Mrellin's voice was so commanding that Abraytha didn't feel he could disobey. Perhaps she was some sort of god, some elemental force of her universe; or perhaps she was simply bossy, and he quite meek. Besides, he was quite lacking in the other-people-to-talk-to department.

One thing which pointedly did not occur to him was that Mrellin might simply have been telepathic, able to plant a suggestion, an inclination in the mind of a conversation partner, without even calling on the full depths of her Archonic heritage. He followed her.

* * *

Nardeth and Zerlan were sitting on one of the three sofas, sipping the Dyrmian tea Nardeth had prepared a few minutes prior, whilst Mrellin's tea rested, its temperature being held constant not by the will of the Archons, but by the Dyrmian tea-leaf's own property of thermal perpetuity.

Zerlan had only just come back to drink his tea after fretting over the destruction of the Ship's navigational matrices.

Nardeth saw Mrellin come back into the living room door with a stranger running behind her. Memories of those dreadful last days in the Watch resurfacing, Nardeth jumped behind the sofa in terror of the worst — that one of the Agents of Providence, subservient to the great Uzza, had descended from their throne on high to pluck them out of the continuum, and banish them to flightless life on some lowly planet.

Whilst trying to calm down, Nardeth recalled that it hadn't all been bad back at the Watch. The days with Lady Leora — Leoradrusendalular, of House Drusenda — had been enjoyable, if a bit odd. Perhaps her demeanour had been a product of the strange circumstances by which she had escaped the Last Great Rewrite, or perhaps she had always been like this, but her joyous brand of intrigue had been refreshing amidst the company of dour spies and broken veterans of Cosmic Warfare.

But there was no way around the fact that the likes of Leora were *not* what they remembered *most* from their time at the Watch.

At least they'd been able to take Mrellin with them when they left — she always knew how to make Nardeth feel safe. When she and Abraytha walked in, only Zerlan was sitting on the sofa, sipping his tea.

Mrellin rolled her eyes.

"Nardeth! It's not the cops, it's just some eccentric traveller."

Slowly, cautiously, Nardeth creeped back out from behind the sofa, and sat back down.

"Sorry," they mumbled.

Zerlan gave them an amiable pat-on-the-back, and gestured for Abraytha to join them — to sit on one of the other two sofas.

Mrellin initially sat on the third before getting up again and pacing around for a few moments. She sat down again.

They all sat awkwardly for a few seconds before Abraytha chimed in, attempting to breach the awkwardness.

"So! What's this place called?"

It was Mrellin, ever-sarcastic, and thinking of the apparent indulgent complexities of Abraytha's own craft, who blurted out:

"Why, it's a Deontological Faustian Universal Anachronistic Surveyor."

"That," Abraytha began, "has implications on its properties and purpose, and —"

"But we call her Zadellin for short!" Zerlan interrupted him.

"No we d —"

"She's such a gem," Zerlan interrupted Nardeth

Mrellin looked distinctly peeved, but smiled all the same as she addressed the outsider. "So, tell us about yourself".

Abraytha looked back at Mrellin, then to Nardeth, and finally to Zerlan, paying particular attention to each of them. He smiled, somewhat wearily, and began his tale.

"I was born, some many years ago, to the great explorer and chronicler of the Universe known as Yophese Iris Colefia — a fact of which I am deeply proud…"

He paused, watching for their reactions, but saw no sign that his hosts had ever heard of the great Yophese Colefia. Chagrined, he continued.

"…born to Yophese Colefia and to the Star Vampire Steorra Janus Upyr, on a little planet in a pocket universe. Wishing to explore some of the Great Cosmos my mother Yophese told me so much about, I set about

constructing a haphazard conglomeration of reality-faring technology, in the hopes I could return there and see the beautiful Cascades of the Gongon, the terrible Constellations of the Hith'par, and the fields of 'yn-Bar. I built my ship from scrapyard parts from across the Cosmos — I think I've got *the* anacronópete in here somewhere, and if I'm not very much mistaken, the original Clock That Went Backwards. Oh, and some dead-shells of Archon timeships, of course. My Ship's name is *Katioka*, and she is, quite frankly, my reason for living." He smiled expectantly and addressed a broad, inviting gesture to the three. "Your turn now"

Abraytha gestured to the three in general.

Mrellin smiled facetiously, making an effort not to acknowledge the awesome incredibility of the horned man's claims.

"Right. Well, we are Celestials, Archons from the great Fortress of History. Nardeth and myself were Watchers of the Fortress. Our mission being to preserve the threads of reality, as the Watch sees it. Together, we faced the most notorious rogues of all time — the Magician of Scott-Land," — she pronounced 'Scotland' with all the awed emphasis of an alien mentioning a faraway locale of myth and legend to another alien, — "and his nefarious paramour, the Woman in Purple."

Mrellin paused, but Abraytha was determined not to show any signs of awe. Turnabout was fair play, and besides, he really *didn't* have the faintest idea what Scottish magicians had to do with anything. Mrellin rolled her eyes at his ostentatious impassivity, and went on.

"Alongside the pair of us Celestial Watchers, with our great and terrible duty, there was Zerlan, Archon technician and engineer extraordinaire. Ze can do anything — including keep this high-maintenance, living Ship of ours running, despite the fact that it is intended to be piloted by a larger crew, and wasn't entirely stable when we — ahem — picked it up, from the stables of the Fortress. His ingenuity allows us to continue on through the Tourbillon, exploring all the cosmos has to offer."

She was aware that she'd over-dramatised their old job, but the only thing worse than being in the Watch, in her view, would be letting the pretentious man across from her *know* how dull an average day at her old desk-job really

had been. Reaching for her mug, she took a smug sip of tea. Nardeth cleared their throat, uncomfortable at the apparent praise of the work of Uzza's Watch.

Zerlan stepped in, verbally. "Now we have that covered, how should we go about, y'know, fixing our ships?"

"Right!" began Mrellin. "Where *were* you going, anyway, Abraytha?"

"Wonderland," he announced.

Abraytha watched for reactions, and, this time got them — but they ran more towards incredulous bemusement than the slightly envious admiration he had been hoping for.

"To see the Mad Hatter," he elaborated to fill the silence, voice growing unsteady once more. "Y-you see, I'd just received an invitation from someone claiming to be a future pen-pal of mine to go there, and —"

"You're very peculiar," Mrellin opined, cutting him off.

Abraytha looked in part insulted, and in part smug. Unwarranted, petty hostility was entirely easier to bounce off of than lack of enthusiasm for the objectively awesome prospect of meeting the Mad Hatter.

"And where were you going?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow with supreme confidence.

"We weren't *going* anywhere in particular," Mrellin replied at once. "But if you must know, we'd just left Eos 6, where we helped a Jewish exohuman revolt against some new factories in her town."

Nardeth butted in, unable to keep in their resentment for the Time Police.

"We're running from the forces of Uzza, a tyrannical new head of the Fortress Watch, or as he sometimes calls it, the 'Watchers of Uzza'. Well, relatively new; he's been around since all of us can remember. Since our people returned to the material universe."

"Returned to the what now?" Abraytha blinked. "Who did you say your people were, again?"

Zerlan looked bored. "Can we talk about our ships again, and how to untangle them?"

"Yes, let's," was Mrellin's response. "I'm sure we all have places to be. Even if we aren't entirely sure what they are yet. You two go over to the collision point and… do whatever you can."

The pair of technical fanatics walked away from Mrellin and Nardeth — leaving them talking about how many dimensions were employed in four-dimensional chess — and towards the Ships' thresholds. Standing there, they examined the fusion of the exteriors of the two mutually alien ships, only to discover that their structures had been interlocked, making the snag incredibly difficult to untangle — even for Zerlan, who had studied Camboolimatics, and for Abraytha, who had considerable hands-on experience with the more higgledy-piggledy areas of Higher-Dimensional Ship architecture.

They both sat down, Zerlan on *Katioka*'s side, Abraytha on *Zadellin*'s, and pondered on what to do.

As it so happened, soon enough, each of them experienced a private revelation, at precisely the same time.

For Zerlan, it went like this:

Our Lord's Imprimatur!

We Archons and our Ship are two sides of one symbiotic Elemental coin — if one of us were to undergo a hasty change… the other would too, through the bond, and then the ship —

Abraytha interrupted, verbally sharing his half of the revelation.

"Of *course*! I could undergo a metamorphosis!"

Zerlan blinked.

Abraytha blinked back.

It was Zerlan who broke the silence.

"…You can metamorphose?" ze said. "I thought only we Lightbringers had that power, by grace of our Lord's imprimatur."

"*Lightbringers*!" Abraytha repeated, snapping his fingers. "So *that*'s what you are."

"Er, yes? We said so?" the technician replied, bemused. "Archons? Celestials? Denizens of the Fortress of History?"

"Ack. You things have *entirely* too many names," Abraytha muttered. "In any case, weren't you listening? I'm half-Star Vampire, on one of my mothers' side."

"…And Star Vampires can recorporate?"

"Well of course we can!" he huffed. "Your ancestors got it from us, you know."

Zerlan looked blank. Abraytha's eyes widened, appalled.

"Oh come on. *Really?*" he groaned. "Child-That-Was-Taken? Urizen's great crime? Not ringing a bell? Well, not that it was necessarily the Lord Founder himself, there's been some historical debate, but surely —"

Zerlan shook zir head in silence. Abraytha exhaled.

"Blimey, what *do* they teach you up there? This stuff is elementary to us. And I don't just mean Vampires, I mean on my planet. I'm a graduate of the University of Alarnakara, and the Saeculi Dei made sure to instruct me in the history of the First Cosmic War, during my theophanies. Why would they not? Like it or not — and believe me I do realise your entire culture being founded on the torture of an abducted child can't be a pleasant feeling — but *like it or not*, it's a crucial part of your Cosmos's primaeval history —"

Abraytha trailed off. Zerlan was staring into his blue eyes, face clenched in an unreadable expression.

"What are *you* staring at?" he asked, then breathed out. "…Ah. I see. You don't know whether to trust me. To believe me. Well, ask yourself this. What's more likely? That your superiors, people like that Uzza character, would keep

you in the dark about your forefathers' crimes — or that I would make up a story this convoluted just to explain why I can change shapes?"

A moment passed. At last, the Lightbringer's expression softened.

"Right," Abraytha nodded. "Good. Now, where were we?"

Zerlan sighed.

"One of us must… Well, I can't ask you to — *we* crashed into *you*, it's — urgh. I need to…" Ze didn't want to say the word, the first time Zerlan had undergone the process it had… changed zir, a lot. Ze didn't want to waste another life. "Come with me. I know where I want it to be."

Curious as to what could possibly be more important than dying, the demi-Shambler followed the Lightbringer back through the Zadellin's twisting corridors and into the room containing the Ship's heart. She had so recently been mended… It would be important, ze thought, to remember what he was fighting for when he went.

* * *

"This is my favourite room," ze explained. "I wanted to see it again, in case it changes, before I go." A tear rolled down zir cheek, and Abraytha kindly pretended not to notice.

Elsewhere in the Ship, Mrellin felt a rolling in her gut, and Nardeth felt a phantom tear, tracing down their sculpted cheekbone.

They raced as one to the place where Zerlan spent most of his time, not needing to activate their mental bond to find him. They knew their shipmate too well.

"Stop! This is my job. A captain goes down with her ship" Mrellin placed a hand on Zerlan's, not waiting for Nardeth to arrive. When they did, they were panting heavily, and murmuring something about there 'never having been a proper vote on the captain thing'. The others ignored them.

"Mrellin, it's okay. I want to do this. Please, just go — you shouldn't have to watch this part."

"No! I'm not letting you… change. Not alone!" she shouted, more desperate than enraged. Abraytha began to sneak away, towards the exit, but did not go unseen.

"And *you*," Nardeth snarled. "Why can't *you* do it? Why does it have to be one of us?"

They were far enough down the hall to be out of earshot — if their unexpected guest had been human.

"It doesn't," Abraytha replied simply, and turned to continue walking.

Nardeth returned to their friends' sides, sending a silent 'thank you' to their new acquaintance.

"You know, if you make this sacrifice for us, I can't make fun of the Ship's new name. Well played — you sure have me right where you want me," Mrellin let out a little chuckle and reaching one finger out to wipe away a tear.

"It's okay, Mrell," ze comforted her as though she were the one crying. "I love our Ship, and I would do anything for her — for all of you. I want to do this. See you on the other side."

Nardeth interrupted. "I don't like this, but I understand why you have to do this, and I support your decision. That is, unless the newcomer keeps his word."

The words shook Zerlan out of zir contented view of the heart. "What do you mean? Where's Abraytha?"

* * *

Abraytha looked back towards his new friends, hoping that this would not be the last time they crossed paths. Turning to his Ship he nodded, solemnly, and without another word, closed the door on *Katioka*'s side — a door which hadn't been there until around three minutes earlier, when the Abode had begun to construct it for its partner.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing?!" shouted Zerlan. "Don't kill yourself for me!"

Back on the other side of the door, Abraytha made their way throughout *Katioka*, searching for the great master-bedroom. Finally, he found it, and lay down, content at last to let this body go.

The colouring on his skin shifted and morphed, as if he were an animated character, switching styles.

These changes accelerated until Abraytha was nothing but a blur of colour and confusion. There was a reason he had come here to do this, out of sight of the others. Vampiric regeneration may have been ancestral to the Archons' ways of reconstructing themselves, but it was a rawer, simpler thing, the power of life and blood, unveiled, unfiltered. Abraytha's biology was reinventing itself, cell by cell, organ by organ. Muscle and sinew parted, revealing gleaming, scarlet bones, then covered them again. As the lips melted away, the unmistakable fangs of a vampire lay revealed for just a moment, before the flesh began knitting itself back together. Other forms flickered amidst the blurring biology — a more lupine form, and a bird-woman-thing — ever so briefly, there was the suggestion of a kraken.

The strigan soul of Abraytha whirled and reformed, fracturing bonds.

His and *Katioka*'s shared duo-soul began to buckle under the strain. As the body of Abraytha was renewed, so too was the form of *Katioka*. For a bare few moments, she became a fluid, shifting thing — and *Zadellin* slipped out of the liquefied snag, free to drift through the Tourbillon once more.

The good ship *Katioka* wasted no time in re-growing her myriad rooms, rebuilding them from her memories — *all* her memories, going back to the day the Unbound Scavenger had completed her, and even beyond.

She welcomed back the howling silence of the Hollow, and let its winds embrace her.

* * *

Mrellin and Nardeth rushed over to the distraught Zerlan and began comforting zir, just as a shrill, shrieking noise started up, sounding like it was emanating from the stranger's Ship. They looked through the small window attached into the threshold-door, and saw… well, they didn't. There was nothing there. The alien Ship had disappeared.

* * *

On that bed awoke Abraytha, looking just the same as before, if not a bit rejuvenated and with a dashing red spot in his left eye. Looking down, he noticed his skin tone had shifted a little, veering very slightly to the redder shades.

* * *

A few hours later, the crew of the Zadellin had finished tidying up their craft.

"Well, I've repaired most of the damage, but it looks like Abraytha's metamorphosis permanently damaged the cloaking mechanism."

"Ah, fudge, so it'll need changing?" asked Mrellin.

"Well, it *would*, only — look I *thought* we had a replacement around here, but I can't find it… I swear, it's like she's moving it about on me."

Ze looked down at zir hands. The other two came over, each placing a hand on zir shoulder. They could tell their tension had little to do with the woes of the cloaking device.

"I'm sure he'll be okay," Nardeth told their friend, remembering how calm Abraytha had been as he'd strode off towards his own Higher-Dimensional Ship.

"I… I guess you're right…"

"And you know what else?" said Mrellin. "Even if he isn't, he wouldn't want us to spend our hard-earned freedom sticking around the interspaces. I say we honour his sacrifice, whatever it might have been. Cascades, Constellations, Fields… I don't know about you, but some of those places he mentioned sounded *dashed* interesting. Anyone for an adventure?"

The three smiled — and set off into infinity.